

Public Hearing - February 27, 2023

Transportation Committee Testimony Submitted by Jay Stange, Transport Hartford Academy Coordinator, Center for Latino Progress

Dear Transportation Committee Co-Chairs Sen. Christine Cohen and Rep. Roland Lemar and Esteemed Members of the Transportation Committee,

I'm Jay Stange and I work as Coordinator for Transport Hartford Academy, a program of the nonprofit Center for Latino Progress. I am grateful to appear before you today to comment on proposed legislation, including raised committee bills HB6743 (Fare-Free Transit), SB1083 (Carbon Budget), and HB 6747 (Bus Stop Modernization and Maintenance Plan) all of which I support, with some requested modifications.

I advocate for safe, equitable access to transit, walking, bicycling and other mobility options for residents of the capital region - with a focus on our Latino residents. A third of the families in neighborhoods we serve don't own a car and another third of households own just one car, often underinsured and likely to be an older potentially unreliable model.

I was moved by powerful and eloquent testimony offered recently to the Transportation Committee by members of the Connecticut Nepali community. The community leaders who spoke explained the lengths Nepali-speaking residents go to in order to acquire a driver's license, including moving to New York City temporarily to pass a written drivers' license test in their first language. The alternative to not having a driver's license and a car is to live "under house arrest" they stated, unable to work, attend school, go to medical appointments or otherwise participate in the economy here in Connecticut.

Public transit is asked to be many things. It's an alternative to single occupancy car use for those trying to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It's safer than car travel for those concerned about rising rates of fatalities on our roads in recent years. It's a place where some seek shelter from extreme heat or cold in Connecticut.

For one friend of mine, an immigrant like me from another country in the Americas, the CTtransit bus is the only way she can get to several locations where she has housekeeping jobs. For returning citizens coming out of incarceration, the bus is a lifeline for making PO meetings or getting to job interviews, often a condition of parole. Many elderly or disabled residents have testified in support of Free CTtransit Bus Fares in resolutions passed in New Haven, Hartford and Stamford. For many, free bus fares mean they can go shopping and get medical services.

I'm grateful to state leaders for making Free Fares on CTtransit possible with federal rescue act funding since April 1 of last year, and for extending it twice. Federal funding for the program is scheduled to end on March 31. Approximately \$32 million was allocated. Commissioner Eucalitto noted in his testimony to this committee that CTtransit ridership is back to pre-pandemic levels.

In fact, ridership increased 92 percent from January 2022 through January 2023, the Commissioner stated in his presentation to a Transportation Committee oversight hearing. Much of the increase, the Commissioner noted, occurred in the first few months of 2022, before Free Fares were instituted. Ridership on CTtransit is now above pre-pandemic levels and well above pre-pandemic levels in some of our urban transit districts. Until we have data from CT DOT about who these riders are, I offer anecdotally that many of the folks taking advantage of Free Fares on CTtransit are riders who I hear from that need this service such as the examples I provided above.

The Governor's budget for the Transportation Department makes no reference to continuing this successful program and I've asked the Appropriations Committee to set aside funding for this program in its 2024-2025 budget. Commissioner Eucalitto said there may be limitations in federal law and transit guidelines to extending the Fare Free Transit program beyond 12 months, even with state funding. But perhaps a creative solution exists. According to a Connecticut Mirror newspaper [article](#) citing a letter from the [Office of Policy Management](#), even with gas tax holidays the Special Transportation Fund will end the year more than \$200 million in the black.

My understanding from CT DOT is a Title VI Fare Equity Study must be created for any bus fare pilots beyond 12 months. Please modify HB6743 to move up the date for such a program to be created as soon as possible and consider investing part of this transportation surplus to support interim Free Fares funding to support Connecticut residents who need it the most. We can provide millions of crucial transit rides to residents and the bus operators who watch out for them for less than the price of a highway interchange.

Additionally please find below the comments of our coalition of community organizations, municipal leaders and individuals explaining our support of Fare Free Transit, sent to Transportation Committee members, CGA Leadership, Gov. Lamont and Commissioner Eucalitto via electronic mail on February 1.

Regarding SB1083, I am supportive of creating a carbon budget for the state of Connecticut and I would ask that the Committee and the Commissioner connect these goals to a targeted reduction of Vehicle Miles Traveled. As detailed in the comments from our Coalition below, emissions generated by cars and light trucks in Connecticut are a large portion of annual emissions. Electrifying vehicles in Connecticut, a program currently supported by state funded rebates, should be viewed as a transitional step, not a final step toward a carbon budget. Reducing emissions by supporting public transportation and active mobility choices is a much more cost effective step.

Finally, in recent weeks, a citizen group of volunteers has completed several bus bench construction projects in Connecticut towns with volunteer labor and private fundraising. This speaks to the incredible need in our state for better bus stop infrastructure. I'm glad to see HB6747 support this work, for which the public has demonstrated an acute need by voting with their hammers and saws and wallets.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify,

Jay Stange, Coordinator
Transport Hartford Academy/Center for Latino Progress
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1 February 2023

Dear Governor Ned Lamont, House Speaker Matthew Ritter, House Majority Leader Jason Rojas, Transportation Committee Co-Chairs Rep. Roland Lemar and Sen. Christine Cohen, and Connecticut Department of Transportation Commissioner Garrett Eucalitto:

The undersigned community organizations welcomed the General Assembly's extension, to March 31, 2023, of funding for fare-free CTtransit buses, accomplished in collaboration with the Governor's office during the November 2022 special session.

Investing in bus service with free or reduced fares is an equitable approach to reducing overall transportation expenses and the state's total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Going forward, we urge the administration and legislative leadership to help us continue to build ridership on public transportation by investing *permanently* in fare-free CT Transit service, including support for our dedicated and hardworking bus operators, without whom our transit system would not function.

Connecticut's fare-free transit program has provided much needed financial relief to many residents and, in turn, has [increased bus ridership](#) in the state. Bus service that is free is an equitable means of reducing transportation expenses for individuals and families, especially amid unstable gas prices, growing inflation, and the ongoing global pandemic. Connecticut's fare-free transit program has removed barriers for new or infrequent riders, especially parents traveling with kids, and has benefitted residents most in need.

Riders who are lower-income, Black or Hispanic, immigrants, or under 50 years old are especially likely to use public transportation on a regular basis. The 2021 American Community Survey shows that Black folks in Connecticut are about 6 times more likely to commute by public transportation than white folks and that Hispanic and Latino folks are about 2.5 times more likely.

The fare-free bus transit program has helped to connect low-income residents and those who do not own cars, such as approximately one in three Hartford and New Haven residents, to services, education, and employment opportunities. Because of fare-free buses, riders also have more money to buy food, pay rent and utility bills, and afford other basic necessities. Furthermore, bus travel is much safer than driving a car.[1] Transit bus operators are typically managing fare payments concurrent with safe vehicle operation. Removing fare collection management from driver duties helps drivers focus on safe operation for all passengers.

In the United States, the transportation sector is one of largest contributors to anthropogenic GHG emissions and accounted for the largest portion of total GHG emissions in 2020 with light-duty vehicles as the top contributor.[2] In Connecticut, the transportation sector accounts for at least 37% of our total GHG emissions, and vehicular travel on state roadways only seems to be increasing.[3] Nevertheless, Connecticut's Global Warming Solutions Act mandates a reduction in the state's GHG emissions by at least 45% by 2030 and 80% by 2050. Fare-free

transit has afforded residents who might otherwise drive vehicles with a simplified opportunity to use the bus to get from point A to point B. More riders opting to use public transportation over personal vehicles will reduce emissions and help the state achieve its climate goals.

Governor Lamont's 2022 [Executive Order](#) mandates the creation of a quantifiable goal to reduce Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) in Connecticut. Such a goal has yet to be defined, however, and we are unaware of a process to accomplish this goal in the Governor's order. Several opportunities are available, including improving transit service to capture mode shift from single occupancy vehicles to transit trips and thereby reduce VMT. We urge the administration and legislature to direct State Department of Transportation (DOT) officials to define a realistic goal to reduce VMT in Connecticut based on all potential remedies and programs, including:

- Ebike Rebates
- Transit Service Improvements (Bus Rapid Transit, Dedicated Bus Lanes, Shortened Route Headways, Extension of CTFastrak, Transit Districts)
- Rail Improvements
- Complete Streets Improvements (including sidewalk improvements)
- Transit Oriented Development

In tandem with extending fare-free transit and improving bus service to capture mode shift from vehicle use, more support is needed for transit bus drivers. The global pandemic has had profound impacts on operators with bus drivers experiencing greater exposure to COVID-19 and elevated death rates.[4] Bus drivers themselves are essential workers, who transport other essential workers. While this was widely recognized, bus drivers had to fight for personal protective equipment (PPE), other protections, and hazard pay too long into the pandemic. They are underappreciated and underpaid, and, given the increased cost of living, what was once an adequate wage is barely enough to pay for basic essentials. We urge you to increase funding for driver compensation.

In addition to the difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty, mental health issues, addiction, and other issues that Connecticut residents are experiencing are present in the transit bus system. People are spending time on the bus sometimes because they do not have anywhere else to go or other services to access. Low-income residents especially are facing rising rents and increasing evictions. Bus drivers need to be able to focus their attention on driving and require additional support beyond compensation to address societal issues occurring on the buses. Measures that should be explored include: pairing social workers with bus routes; adding supervisors designated for safety issues; and installing, improving, or repairing safety equipment.

Given the multitude of complex issues facing riders and bus drivers, we join with DOT Commissioner Garrett Eucalitto in putting into statute a Council of Bus Riders, similar to the commuter rail council, to work with transit constituencies to address the needs of riders and operators on CTtransit lines moving forward.

Again, we applaud the Governor and the General Assembly's November action to extend funding for fare-free transit buses until the end of March 2023 and strongly encourage the administration and state legislators to work with us to permanently build ridership on public transportation and provide additional support for bus drivers.

We believe in using existing data as well as creating new qualitative and quantitative tools so that public policy is directly connected to the lived experiences of the people most impacted by these types of decisions both pre and post implementation. We urge our elected officials and agency leaders to further embed these methods in their work so that racial equity and social justice become foundational elements for good governance.

Sincerely,

Tiana Hercules and Josh Michtom
Hartford City Council

Maureen Pollack and Jonathan Jacobson
Stamford Board of Representatives

Jay Stange
Transport Hartford Academy at the Center for Latino Progress

Robbie Goodrich
R.A.C.C.E.

Samantha Dynowski
Sierra Club Connecticut

Eli Sabin
New Haven Board of Alders, Ward 7

Tenaya Taylor
Nonprofit Accountability Group

Alex Rodriguez
Save the Sound

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Sarah Roy
Livable Streets Advocate, Fairfield

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CT Citizen Action Group

Aziz Dehkan
Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs

Nathan Frohling
The Nature Conservancy, Connecticut Chapter

Pete Harrison
Desegregate CT

Thomas Broderick
Liveable Streets Advocate, Trumbull

Kat Morris
Seaside Sounds Club

Chris Schweitzer
New Haven Climate Movement

Spencer Early
Connecticut Urbanists

Abigail Roth and Stasia Brewczynski
Safe Streets Coalition of New Haven

Dwayne David Paul
Collaborative Center for Justice

Ashley Blount
Black Infinity Collective

Melinda Tuhus
CT Climate Crisis Mobilization

Skip Bourke
South Windsor

[1] American Public Transportation Association. (August 2018). Public Transit Is Key Strategy in Advancing Vision Zero, Eliminating Traffic Fatalities.

<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/Resources/resources/hottopics/Documents/APTA%2520VZN%2520Transit%2520Safety%2520Brief%25208.2018.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1667917684347064&usg=AOvVaw1pob3QqNC6i5YMekZrvqpt>

[2] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (Last updated July 14, 2022). Fast Facts on Transportation Greenhouse Gas Emissions.

<https://www.epa.gov/greenvehicles/fast-facts-transportation-greenhouse-gas-emissions>; see also Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. (Last updated January 2016). Reducing Your Personal Transportation Emissions.

<https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Climate-Change/Reducing-Your-Personal-Transportation-Emissions> (stating majority of transportation energy consumed comes from passenger cars and light trucks and therefore reducing personal transportation emissions can have large impacts on total transportation emissions in Connecticut)

[3] See Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. (2020) 2017 Connecticut Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory.

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DEEP/climatechange/2017_GHG_Inventory/2017_GHG_Inventory.pdf, p. 2; see also Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. (2021). 2018 Connecticut Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory.

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DEEP/climatechange/GHG_Emissions_Inventory_2018.pdf, p. 3 (noting 3% increase in transportation sector emissions between 2014 and 2018), p. 6 (stating improvements in emissions per vehicle miles traveled are offset by increase in total vehicular travel on Connecticut roads and highways, and 2018 emissions slightly exceeded 1990 levels).

[4] See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (August 19, 2022). COVID-19 Outbreaks and Mortality Among Public Transportation Workers – California, January 2020 – 2021.

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7133a4.htm>